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NEWMAN'S LITERARY PREFERENCES

At the outset of his *Life of Newman* Mr. Wilfred Ward emphasizes the Cardinal's many-sidedness. To some he seems a religious philosopher, like Pascal; to others an ecclesiastical writer of history, like Bossuet; the casual student thinks of him as the leader of the Oxford Movement who turned Catholic, and later defended his "mighty mother" against Charles Kingsley's blundering Anglicanism; while the religious *savant* regards him as the most penetrating modern theologian. To-day, unquestionably, all these aspects of Newman's genius still demand homage, but men read him now chiefly because, as Dean Stanley has said, he belongs "not to provincial dogma, but to the literature of all time".

Mr. Lewis Gates, in his brief but brilliant analysis of Newman as a writer of English prose, remarks especially upon his mediævalism:—

"Newman was intensely alive to the beauty and poetic charm of the life of the Middle Ages. One is sometimes tempted to describe him as a great mediæval ecclesiastic astray in the nineteenth century and heroically striving to remodel life in harmony with his temperamental needs."

The contention is sound. Mr. Gates had not space to develop his theory in his short preface. And Newman's close bond with Romanticism has never been adequately stated. His secular writings are not extensive, and students have not fully explored his theological and controversial prose. It has been the fashion to catalogue Newman as "a great stylist", or "a modern prose-master", and then stop. But Newman was an apostle not only of two mighty churches, but also of that mysterious movement of thought and feeling called Romanticism.

One way of better comprehending this impulse in Newman is to understand more precisely his literary tastes. Much has been said of his attitude towards secular writing, but little of his pronounced preferences in English literature.

For to think of Newman as intellectually aloof from the world is absurd. His was the prodigious power of activity which has

so often characterized great minds. He believed, as he was wont to say, that "life is for action". Anecdotes abound of his contact with the simple folk of everyday life. "Nothing was easier", says Father Ignatius Dudley Ryder, of the Oratory, "than to arouse Newman's interest, for everything interested him,—literature, politics, the trade and stipulations of the merchant, the circumstances of persons and places known to him, rural life, the studies of young men, the thoughts of the simple and lowly." Favorite lines of his, quoted in the *Idea of a University*, from Juvenal, suggest Newman himself:—

"Quicquid agunt homines, votum, timor, ira, voluptas,
Gaudia, discursus."

To fancy that this passion for life itself—for it was a passion, intense, comprehending, tender—would not include an interest in the web that man has spun from his complex life, literature, would, again, be absurd. Though a colleague at the Oratory declared that Newman read with real attention only books which made for righteousness, Newman himself repeatedly avows his concern with all literature which his fellow-men had created. His conviction on this point often rises into ardor. He denounces in the *Idea of a University* the illusion of "a Christian literature":—

"It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of sinful man. . . . Give up the study of man, as such, if so it must be; but say you do so. Do not say you are studying him, his history, his mind and his heart, when you are studying something else. Man is a being of genius, passion, intellect, conscience, power. He exercises these various gifts in various ways, in great deeds, in great thoughts, in heroic acts, in hateful crimes. . . . He takes a thousand shapes, and undergoes a thousand fortunes. *Literature records them all to the life.*"

Regarding Newman's vast reading in ecclesiastical literature this paper makes but slight comment. He read and especially loved Saint John, Chrysostom, and Tertullian, and there are countless instances of his devotion to Saint Basil, the two Gregories, and Saint Athanasius. Such study was vitally related to his conversion to Rome, and to his most constructive

statements of faith, such as the *Development of Christian Doctrine*, and the *Apologia*, as well as to his contributions to theological controversy in pamphlet, oration, and sermon.

Classical literature, too, Newman made his own. Wherever the reader may travel in Newman's prose he will find the blessed isles of Homer, Euripides, and Vergil. For Newman delighted in imagery and allusion drawn from the Greek or from the Latin to complete the luminousness of his carefully developed thought. Yet in only one case can definite proof of these influences on his style be named, and that one case is Cicero. Tully, Newman frankly acknowledged, had been, since youth, his guide and complete mentor in points of manner. Writing to the Reverend John Hayes on April 13, 1869, he says:—

“As to patterns for imitation, the only master of style I have ever had . . . is Cicero. I think I owe a great deal to him, and as far as I know to no one else. His great mastery of Latin is shown especially in his clearness.”

Newman's brilliant essay on Cicero was written in 1824, and was republished in the first volume of *Historical Sketches*.

What we know of Newman's preferences in English Literature prior to 1800 is largely by inference. He speaks of reading in boyhood “some romance, Mrs. Radcliffe's or Miss Porter's”; at the same time he read “Tom Paine's tracts, Hume's *Essay on Miracles*, some of Voltaire”. Evidently there was no systematic or even desultory devouring in youth of the literature of his own country. There exist few allusions to Shakespeare, or, in the Oxford years of reading, to contemporary poetry. Mr. J. C. Shairp notes that he once remarked to a friend at Oxford: “No! I was never soaked in Wordsworth, as some of my contemporaries were.” It is safe to assume that he had no deep-rooted love for Shakespeare. But it is equally certain that he was able to quote regularly and freely from the plays, as he does in *The Church of the Fathers*, *The Last Years of St. Chrysostom*, *The Mission of St. Benedict*, and *Discussions and Arguments*.

Of other Elizabethan dramatists the echoes are few. But the prose writers of the age Newman seems to have known well. Bacon is honored with several pages in *The Idea of a University*. He was doubtless especially attracted by Bacon's style,

—what he calls his “majestic gravity of phrase”. For Bacon as a man of letters he apparently cared nothing; and his emotions towards him as a philosopher and a man were those of distaste and horror. To Newman Bacon was a heathen and a priest of the hated cult of worldly expediency:—

“Alas! that he too, like Socrates or Seneca, must be stripped of his holy-day coat, which looks so fair, and should be but a mockery; . . . and, for all his vast abilities, should, in the littleness of his own moral being, but typify the intellectual narrowness of his school!”

In a note on *The Idea of a University* Newman declares that he is in agreement with Macaulay's essay on Bacon's philosophy; but that he concurs in more than the general beneficent trend of Bacon's philosophy is inadmissible.

Newman's literary interests in the later seventeenth century were determined largely by his theological viewpoint. Concerning the Dissenter, Milton, he is silent. Himself an Evangelical in youth, he doubtless understood Milton's attitude; his intellectual sympathy with dogma radically opposed to his own was unbounded. Emotionally and morally, however, there was but slight bond between the Puritan leader of the seventeenth century and the Catholic prince of the nineteenth. The frequent references to Milton in the *Apologia* are bound up in theological discussion, but in his secular writings Newman often has recourse to Milton's poetry. “The world is all before it where to choose”, a paraphrase of the fourth line from the end of *Paradise Lost*, occurs in *The Idea of a University* and everywhere reappear phrases from the minor poems. On May 26, 1863, Newman writes Helen Church of “the cheerful ring of the mower's scythe on the lawn, which Milton long before me had noted”. And in *The Present Position of Catholics in England* the indestructible prejudice of the Protestant is illustrated by the “day-star” in *Lycidas*:—

“And tricks its beams, and with new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.”

Similarly, *Comus* is quoted in the passage on the Athenian Schools in *Rise and Progress of Universities*; in the same book

Abelard's fate is illustrated by an excerpt from *Samson Agonistes*; and in the ornate lecture on the Tartars in *The Turks in Their Relation to Europe* the picture of Zengis on his throne calls to Newman's mind Milton's vision of Satan in state, as described in the first part of *Paradise Lost*.

Linked with Milton in Newman's study of theology is Jeremy Taylor, for whom Newman seemed to have something very like affection. *Holy Living* and *Holy Dying* influenced him perceptibly; one instance is a letter to his mother written on December 3, 1832. He urges her to proffer a heterodox friend "some book *on the Church* . . . like 'Thomas à Kempis', or Taylor's *Holy Living*". Altogether, it is difficult to ascribe to Newman much interest in the secular literature of the later seventeenth century. Of his acquaintance with poetry, other than Milton's, there is hardly a trace. Seventeenth-century lyrics which really move him are George Herbert's. Newman shared the Tractarians' love of Herbert. His highest compliment to Keble is to compare him to Herbert, and the death of his dear friend J. W. Bowden again moves him to thoughts of Herbert. On September 19, 1844, he writes Keble concerning Bowden's death:—

"It seems very much to realize George Herbert's notion of going from earth to Paradise, as from one room to another."

As Newman's reading in English literature of the seventeenth century had always an ecclesiastical bias, so his love of the classicists found fullest expression in the succeeding century. He felt, particularly, profound admiration for the perfection, within certain limits, of Joseph Addison's prose style. The resemblance of Addison's thought and manner of expression to Cicero's he considered striking. Cicero, he says, "would have been eminently successful in short, miscellaneous essays, like those of the *Spectator*, had the manners or the age allowed it". Above all, both Cicero and Addison, he believed, "inspired their countrymen with *literary taste*". And at the end of the essay on Cicero he declares: "They resembled each other in the return [revived popularity] they experienced." Certainly, of all university men of the eighteenth century whose manner was

especially typical of their age Newman would have named as first "Addison, the son and brother of clergymen, the fellow of an Oxford Society, the resident of a college which still points to the walk which he planted". And, besides, Addison became to Newman, as he indicates in *The Idea of a University*, the supreme example of the folly of regarding literature as the precise product of a church, a university, or a system. For, classicist as he was, Addison's immortality depends not on university or church, but on experience of life. Newman's apogee in *The Idea of a University* includes a rare tribute to Addison's place in the established body of literature:—

"The world he lived in made him and used him. While his writings educated his own generation, they have delineated it for all posterity after him."

Newman thought highly, too, of Doctor Johnson's classical erudition, but he shows no enthusiasm for what he wrote or what his character meant to the age. Moreover, he was unpleasantly affected by Johnson's hypochondriacal religion. A letter to the Reverend S. Rickards, written on February 9, 1835, has a passing reference to this: "In the last century Dr. Johnson is . . . [a] striking instance . . . [of] taking the gloomy side of religion." But he is able to quote with facility from Johnson in the disquisition on Cicero, and to allude glibly to Johnson's *mot*, as related by Boswell, that "the first Whig was the Devil"

Newman did not care for the poetry of the eighteenth century. His allusions to it are negligible. Much of the Cardinal's theological anathema was directed against the negative philosophers and encyclopædists of the age; it is not surprising that he remained untouched by the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and their schools. In the chapter on the Macedonian schools in *Rise and Progress of Universities* he praises Dryden, and in *The Mission of St. Benedict* he creates a curious contrast to his own warmly tinted prose by quoting from the icy Pope. On the whole, however, expectation is fulfilled: he ignores the poetry of Queen Anne and of the earlier Georges.

More surprising, perhaps, is his neglect of the later poetry of the century. There is no evidence, it seems, that he was at all

affected by Burns, Thomson, or, indeed, by any of the early Romanticists. One reminiscence only occurs of Cowper, but that is a moving and characteristic one. On October 25, 1863, he writes Mrs. Brownlow concerning the popular false notion of the Catholic worship of images:—

“In England Catholics pray *before* images, not *to* them. As to the nature of the feeling itself, and its absolute incongruity with any intellectual intention of addressing the image as an image, I think it is not difficult for any one with an ordinary human heart to understand it. Do we not love the pictures that we have of friends departed? Will not a husband wear in his bosom and kiss the miniature of his wife? Cannot you fancy a man addressing himself to it, as if it were the reality? Think of Cowper’s lines on his Mother’s picture. ‘Those lips are thine,’ he says, ‘thine own sweet smile I see’—and then ‘Fancy shall steep me in Elysian reverie, a momentary dream *that thou art She.*’ And then he goes on to the Picture, ‘My Mother.’”

How like Newman! Self-revelation is here. Such love of earthly poetry as this stern, tender man permitted himself was to be given to souls like Cowper’s; never to the frosty complacency of the age of Dryden, but to his own peers, the poets of nineteenth-century Romanticism.

Father Ryder’s brief record of Newman’s literary preferences mentions no intimacy with his contemporaries in prose and verse, save through the medium of their books. Newman was a man of letters as well as a churchman, but he was never a member of a literary circle. Even Kingsley, his dearest enemy in literary dialectic, he never saw. And many others, it may be frankly stated, he did not wish to know. But for the writings of still others he manifested the keenest sympathy and affection. These literary preferences are so distinct, so intense, and, when thoughtfully considered, so characteristic, that they illumine a lovely, and, I fear, an almost forgotten side of Newman’s nature. Not now the theologian, nor the searcher of men’s souls in dim St. Mary’s, but an Englishman absorbed in the romance and beauty of English literature. We see him relaxed; *dégagé*; deep, as when an imaginative boy, in some old tale, as told by his beloved Southey or Sir Walter.

For the influence of Sir Walter Scott upon him was enormous. Doubtless it was linked with those mystical dreams of boyhood of which Newman was wont to make so much. In 1871, sending thanks for a copy of the *Life of Scott*, he writes:—

“In one sense I deserve it; I have ever had such a devotion . . . to Walter Scott. As a boy, in the early summer mornings I read *Waverly* and *Guy Mannering* in bed when they first came out, before it was time to get up; and long before that—I think, when I was eight years old—I listened eagerly to *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, which my mother and aunt were reading aloud.”

Newman was deeply thankful for Scott's power to turn the eyes of men again towards the Middle Ages, and he felt that in this respect he and Scott were basically in accord with each other. It is in the *Apologia* that this gratitude finds its fullest expression, in a passage which first appeared in the pages of the *British Critic*:—

“The general need of something deeper and more attractive than what had offered itself elsewhere, may be considered to have led to his popularity; and by means of his popularity he reacted on his readers, stimulating their mental thirst, feeding their hopes, setting before them visions, which, when once seen, are not easily forgotten, and silently indoctrinating them with nobler ideas, which might afterwards be appealed to as first principles.”

So in the pages of the ecclesiastic ring the melodies of the minstrel. Thus in the description of the persecution of the Christians in *Callista* Newman pauses suddenly to say:—

“It would require . . . the magic pen of Sir Walter, to catalogue and to picture . . . the figures and groups of that most miserable procession.”

And, as a single instance in *Loss and Gain*:—

“‘Why, Fusby,’ said Vincent, overhearing and coming up, ‘you are like the three old crones in *The Bride of Lammermoor* who wished to have straiking of the Master of Ravenswood.’”

Nor is it fancy to detect the influence of Scott's genius for description in the novels of Newman. This is especially apparent

in certain passages in *Callista*, such as the pictures of the plague of locusts, or Juba's madness. In Newman's lectures and letters, too, Scott is immanent. In *Discussions and Arguments*, for example, there is *Quentin Durward*, and in a letter to his mother, in 1820, there is the usual praise of *Ivanhoe*.

Unquestionably, Newman's liking for Scott's novels was intensified by the moral fibre he found in them and in their author's character. Again and again he praises their persuasive benevolence. As Father Ryder says, he thought of Scott's writings as "an influence for good as well as a source of artistic delight". On July 17, 1836, in praising Keble for an excellent sermon, he writes:—

"You see it seems to me a great object, as Sir Walter Scott beat bad novels out of the field, in like manner to beat out bad sermons by supplying a more *real* style of sermon."

The continuance of personal respect and regard for Scott is evident in a letter written to Hope Scott on December 16, 1852:—

"When he was dying, I was saying prayers (whatever they were worth) for him, continually thinking of Keble's words: 'Think on the minstrel as ye kneel'."

A modern reader will appreciate Newman's real devotion to romance for its own sake, if he realizes that next to Scott he loved best, in secular literature, Robert Southey. Southey he knew and respected, and he was fond of thinking that Southey's writings inculcated virtue. But, in addition, he read, re-read, and quoted, with pleasure, those interminable pæans of boredom, *Thalaba*, and *The Curse of Kehama*. The reader of Newman's prose encounters lines from these two poems constantly cropping up. Charles Reading, the hero of *Loss and Gain*, on the brink of conversion to the Roman church, and speaking of the supposed corruption in the fold, says:—

"I now believe it to be like those hideous forms which in fairy tales beset good knights, when they would force their way into some enchanted palace. Recollect the words in *Thalaba*, 'The talisman is faith'."

In *Rise and Progress of Universities* Newman praises the overwhelming learning of the two pseudo-epics, and in the *Apologia* Southey is mentioned in the same breath with Scott. Father Ryder says that Newman admitted having "an immense liking" for Southey, and, in particular, for *Thalaba*. What attracted him was its romantic quality,—

"its succession of pictures, which so full of colour never glitter, have nothing of the impressionist about them; the tremendous catastrophe in which the hero dying achieves his victory, without earthly recompense."

Writers with a wholly alien point of view had, generally, little sway over Newman. Yet Thackeray, the novelist *par excellence* of this mortal life, was a favorite. Newman maintained his eager interest in Thackeray until the very end of Thackeray's life, reading every word that the novelist wrote, even to the last sad prose in the *Cornhill*. Thackeray's half-cynical analysis of life filled Newman with amazed pity, and from his quick taking-off he drew a lesson. Yet there is real affection in the letter that he wrote Miss Holmes just after Thackeray's death. He wishes, he says, "to express the piercing sorrow" that he feels at the loss:—

"You know I never saw him, but you have interested me in him, and one saw in his books the workings of his mind, —and he has died with such awful suddenness. A new work of his has been advertised, and I looked forward with pleasure to reading it, and now the drama of his life is closed, and he himself is the greatest instance of the text of which he was so full: '*Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas.*' I wonder whether he has known his own decay, for decay I think there has been. I thought his last novel betrayed lassitude and exhaustion of mind, and he has lain by apparently for a year. . . . What a world this is! How wretched they are who take it for their portion. Poor Thackeray! It seems but the other day since we became Catholics. Now all his renown has been since that—he has made his name, has been made much of, has been fêted, and has gone out."

Vanity Fair, *Pendennis* and the rest! Romance it is again that wins Newman. Thwarted romance, perhaps, in the lives of Becky Sharp and Laura, but none the less romance.

In fact, Newman's instinctive touchstone, in his reading, when it was not righteousness, was romance. It is, perhaps, true to say that Newman seldom cared for books whose general trend was not to make the will of God prevail. But it is equally true that there are notable cases of his liking books whose only appeal could have been their romance. A book which lacked both of these qualities could not hold him. Thus the realism and the agnosticism of George Eliot repelled him doubly; he could not endure the novels of natural fact. On the other hand, although he condemned Byron, he was unable to resist his ecstatic romance. "I think", says Father Ryder, "he could have admired Byron heartily, if his moral disapprobation had allowed him. I have heard him speak with enthusiasm of the third canto of *Childe Harold* with an '*O si sic omnia!*'" In *Rise and Progress of Universities* Newman quotes from Byron's *Bride of Abydos*, and various other allusions attest something more than acquaintance with the poet. Yet, as may be guessed, Byron's way of life received scant shrift from Newman. In his historical sketch, *The Conversion of St. Augustine*, occurs his real judgment of Byron:—

"We have seen in our own day, in the case of a popular poet, an impressive instance of a great genius throwing off the fear of God, seeking for happiness in the creature, roaming unsatisfied from one object to another, breaking his soul upon itself, and bitterly confessing and imparting his wretchedness to all around him."

When, then, righteousness and romance are at variance, righteousness conquers,—but there is also that regretful "*O si sic omnia!*"

There is, too, a perfect and delightful consistency in Newman's dislike of the realism of Jane Austen. Speaking of Miss Austen he declares flatly that what he expects in a novel is *romance*. Mrs. Mozley quotes Newman's letter to her with his opinion of Jane Austen with "a sense almost of disloyalty":—

"I have been reading *Emma*. Everything Miss Austen writes is clever, but I desiderate something. There is a want of *body* to the story. The action is frittered away in over-little things. There are some beautiful things in it.

Emma herself is the most interesting to me of all her heroines. I feel kind to her whenever I think of her. *But Miss Austen has no romance—none at all.* . . . What vile creatures her parsons are! She has not a dream of the high Catholic *ἥθος*."

An examination of Newman's literary preferences is thus suggestive to those who regard Newman not merely as an ecclesiastic but as a creator of English literature. Such a study proves primarily that he was a descendant of romantic tradition. Newman's purely literary interests were not attached to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it is clear that the emotions aroused in him by a Bacon or a Dryden were chiefly those of amazement and intellectual curiosity. Even a Shakespeare or a Milton were alien to him in comparison with his profound and instinctive concern for what was being thought and written by his contemporaries. Two touchstones he employed always and unconsciously: the love of righteousness and the love of romance. Wordsworth's pantheism he disliked; the romantic strain in him he loved, and he never tired of quoting the opening lines of the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. Crabbe's realism he called "vulgar familiarity", but he found delight in the romantic character of some of the *Tales*. Fouqué's *Romantic Tales* he praises *passim*, and *Sintram* engrossed him. A mental résumé of Newman's attitudes towards English literature of various periods and tendencies will convince the reader that, although never of any group, Newman was an integral part of the Romantic Revival. Possibly his isolation is but a further proof of the force of the movement; men so utterly different as Byron and Newman are moulded by its spirit. All that Newman truly loves in the writings of his contemporaries was allied with his sensitive feeling for the magic of romance. Every literary preference of Newman's proclaims him, directly or indirectly, a Romanticist.

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